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TRAVELLERS PERSECUTED ACROSS EUROPE. NOW THE HATRED HAS COME HERE

'WRENCHED FROM OUR HOMES AT AN HOUR'S NOTICE'

Basildon council evicted Travellers at a site in Essex last week, and is threatening to evict more. **Sadie Robinson** spoke to some of those on the frontline of the attacks



(main) Traveller Catherine McCann is removed by Constant & Co bailiffs. She says, "Don't touch me. Don't treat us like dogs. We are not dogs." (Picture: Elisabeth Blanchet/ www.elisabethblanchet.com) (above) A banner hangs in front of the Dale Farm site (Picture: Socialist Worker)

YOU CAN hear the bulldozers from Mary McCann's caravan. They are digging trenches and raking dirt over ground that, just days before, was home to seven families.

The families, all Travellers, were evicted from the Hovefields site in Essex on the orders of Basildon's Tory council last week. They were the latest victims of the Europe-wide assault on Travellers and Roma Gypsies.

Mary's two sisters were among the people evicted from Hovefields.

"They are devastated," Mary told Socialist Worker. "My sisters lived there for six years. Now the bailiffs have come and ripped apart families."

Kathleen was also evicted from the site on Tuesday. "I'm very upset," she said. "I can't sleep for worrying about what's going to happen. My life's been turned upside down."

Tilly has temporarily escaped eviction, having launched a court appeal arguing that the council has to find her an alternative site. She says it's only a matter of time before she is forced to move too—despite the fact that she has lived there for nine years.

"I feel really terrible," she said. "My health's not good anyway but this is making things worse. It's horrible hearing the bulldozers—they start at between six and seven in the morning."

"I'm having sleepless nights."

Mary's two sisters are now living with her and her four children in one caravan. Her plot is also under threat. She had lived there legally for six years, but the council has now revoked her licence and declared that she is not a Gypsy so she can't stay there.

"I've got four kids and another one on the way," she said. "The stress of all this is really getting me down. The council has never considered my children or circumstances. They won't provide alternative sites for me to move to. They don't care."

"The children aren't saying very much but they know what's going on. I wonder how it's affecting them. I hope this isn't a sign of what the future will be like for Travellers."

Unfortunately it seems that it might be. A few miles down the road is Dale Farm—one of the biggest Traveller sites in Britain. Families have made this their home since the 1970s—they bought and own the land—yet now the council wants to bulldoze it.

There will be a hearing at Southend county court on Thursday of this week. The court will decide whether the council has a duty to offer them alternative land before it evicts them.

Jean lives at Dale Farm with her daughter and triplet sons. She said, "At any minute the bailiffs could come in, pull you and your kids out of bed and smash up all your things. It's hell."

"My mum's waiting for a hip operation. How will she cope if she's moved off?"

"We're living in fear," Elby Dunn told Socialist Worker. "If we get thrown out of here, we have no place to go. There are women with young children, pregnant women, and people who are ill—I've got chronic asthma."

"It's like everybody has rights bar the travelling people."

Her daughter, also called Elby, is furious at the lies that are told about Travellers in much of the mainstream media.

'We're living in fear. If we get thrown out of here, we have no place to go'

These paint Travellers as dishonest criminals who are only interested in themselves. "There are people here who go to London to take clothes to homeless people," she said.

"There's a church near here that everyone goes to. When it needed a new carpet, we all chipped in. Some of the women go and clean it. Someone else paid to fix the roof when it was leaking. The papers never print that stuff."

Another myth is that Travellers live in dirt and are a blemish on the wider community. Anyone visiting Dale Farm will see that the opposite is true. People have a real sense of pride about the site—there are immaculate homes with flowers and plants adorning the outside.

Since the council evicted Travellers at Hovefields, people living at Dale Farm say they have seen more of the police.

"They fly a helicopter over us at night and it scares the children," James, another resident, told Socialist Worker. "The children go to school afraid that the caravans won't be here when they come back."

"We can't sleep. Some of us are up all night watching to see if the bailiffs come. Everybody is under stress."

Many people are baffled at the way the council is treating them. Dale Farm was a scrapyard before Travellers made their homes there. It isn't costing the council anything to let them stay—but the council says it's prepared to spend £3 million to get them out.

"There are lots of things they could spend that money on," said Jack, another Traveller. "In Essex, old people will die this winter because they can't afford heating."

"This is racial discrimination. We've bought our homes and our land. Why can't they just leave us as we are?"

Many at Dale Farm have been Travellers all their lives. They see the threat to evict them as an attack on their culture.

David said, "They are trying to do away with our way of life. It's not like we've stolen this land—we're not squatters. But the government and the council give us nothing except grief."

"To them we're vermin. But we're human beings."

Like many others, David is perplexed as to why the council wants to evict Dale Farm residents.

"All it will achieve is that this will become a field," he said. "But there are plenty of fields around here. I don't know why they need this one too."

The council says there are homes for people to move into and that the evictions won't leave people homeless. David disagrees.

He said, "In any case, we don't want, or need, houses. They should give houses to people who really need them. We just want to be left in our own homes that we bought and paid for."



CONSTANT & CO

Bailiffs who evicted the Hovefields site

CONSTANT & CO is the bailiff that evicted Travellers at the Hovefields site last week.

It is the subject of complaints regarding needless destruction of property during forced evictions, failure to adhere to health and safety regulations, and disregard of international human rights law.

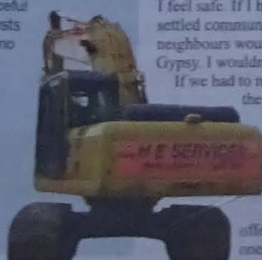
The Dale Farm Housing Association submitted a dossier to the High Court regarding a previous eviction at the Hovefields site undertaken by Constant.

It contained evidence that the company had carried out operations with heavy machinery while children were present, had failed to enclose demolition sites with fencing and had smashed up caravans and mobile homes. Gratian Puxon of the Dale Farm Housing Association describes the evictions at Hovefields this time:

"Bailiffs began knocking on caravans and mobile homes giving occupants one hour to pack up and leave. The company did not erect perimeter fencing around the demolition site, allowing children and adults to approach close to heavy diggers and even mount a contractor's lorry."

Constant issued a press release on the "deconstruction of the site". It says, "There was some initial resistance, including from some non-Traveller peaceful protesters, and two arrests were made. There were no injuries reported."

It adds, "A majority of the Travellers accepted the inevitability of the return of the land to its lawful permitted use and co-operated fully. Assistance was given to each belongings when required."



'We face bigotry from the settled community'

Mary Ann McCarthy, who has lived at Dale Farm for almost nine years, told Socialist Worker about the situation facing Travellers there

"IN ALL the time I've lived here we've never had peace of mind. There's always been the threat of eviction."

I've been evicted in the past. I've had police rattling windows at six in the morning saying you've got to get out. They wouldn't even let me boil the kettle to give an infant some milk.

I've been a Traveller my whole life. But travelling got harder—we were always being moved on and over time had fewer places to go to.

When we got this land it wasn't a beauty spot—it was a mess. We tarmacked the road, put septic tanks in, put electricity in. We cleaned it up and made a home out of it.

It's hard to explain why I want to be a Traveller to someone who isn't one. I've never lived in a house in my life. I never thought of doing anything else but travelling.

Here I can leave my door open and it's fine. I know everybody and I feel safe. If I had to live in the settled community, I'd be scared my neighbours would call me a dirty Gypsy. I wouldn't feel safe.

If we had to move it would split up the community because there's nowhere big enough for us to live together.

The council says it offers an alternative housing but it is offering us places that no one would want to live in.



Mary Ann McCarthy

And a lot of people have been offered no place at all.

They offered me a bedsit—one room on my own away from my friends and family.

The local press and MPs say we don't want to integrate. But I have a lot of friends in the settled community. We go to bingo and mass with them. I would like more mixing. But it doesn't always happen and that's not our fault.

I'm delighted that my grandchildren go to school. They love it. They started off going to school with about 200 settled children. But the parents took the settled children out of the school within weeks.

Things have got worse since the Tories came in. They are only for the rich because they're rich themselves.

The council says there are too many Travellers in Basildon. They would never say that about any other group. We're just living on hope."

What do socialists say?

Do individuals make a difference in history?

WE ARE bombarded with the idea that history is made by great individuals. Our past is told as the history of great men and our present is often reduced to passively watching the decisions of our "betters".

On other occasions the "failure" to get a job is said to be the result of poor individual choices. Such accounts miss out the material reality that shapes all our lives and limits the space for decision-making.

Economic crisis and unemployment are features of capitalist society that no individual on their own can alter.

There are two ways of looking at this. One is "We cannot make history," as the 19th century German politician Otto Bismarck wrote. "We must wait while it is being made."

In contrast Karl Marx said that human beings "make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."

But at the same time, "History does nothing, it 'possesses no immense wealth,' it 'wages no battles.' It is man, real, living man who does all that."

Marx's great insight was to point out that individuals make history. But that they cannot influence society or history in just any direction they choose.

Subjective

Individuals cannot exert their will independently of the conditions in which they find themselves.

Put simply, if there is not enough food to go around, then feeding everyone is not possible. But if there is enough food to go around—and there is—there must also be the subjective conditions to make a world free of hunger possible.

There must be a level of consciousness and organisation among a sufficient number of people to change the way society is organised.

The extent of influence an individual has is determined by the weight of social forces on them.

As the Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky wrote, "Similar (of course, far from identical) irritations in similar conditions call out similar reflexes, the more powerful the irritation, the sooner it overcomes personal peculiarities."

"To a tickle, people react differently, but to a red-hot iron, alike. As a steam-hammer converts a sphere and a cube alike into sheet metal, so under the blow of too great and inexorable events resistances are smashed and the boundaries of 'individuality' lost."



Churchill: a unique contribution?

Under the pressure of class society, we cannot simply move to something else by force of will.

Repeatedly urging for a general strike or revolution will be a cry in the wilderness without a strong workers' movement, in which our class has established from experience the confidence and know-how to conduct effective struggle.

But when conditions have mellowed for such acts then they have to be turned into reality by leadership.

History is full of situations in which a point of extreme tension—where social forces are balanced on a knife's edge—is broken in one direction or another by the action or inaction of individuals.

This tension lies within every movement of resistance and campaign. Whether to resist and in what way is a constant debate. How individuals respond and how they convince others to act is of vital importance.

One aspect of this is building up a counterweight to the respect for the establishment, and the status quo.

So when a revolutionary stands up on a table and says, "We must occupy this factory", they have the respect of their workmates to know that they are not mad but are to be trusted and are convincing.

At the Visteon car plants last year there were individuals who had enough respect to lead their fellow workers into inspiring occupations.

A few months earlier, at the BMW plant in Oxford, there was nobody to do the same in similar circumstances. In both cases there was the possibility, but it didn't automatically happen.

Knowing when to fight and what it is possible to achieve at any moment come through both individual experience and those of the class as a whole.

A key mechanism of for distilling that experience is for people to organise together as a revolutionary party.

Any revolutionary party has to be full of "leaders"—people who can take initiatives, think on their feet and learn from the battles that they are part of to take the struggle forward.

Imperialism & austerity

the twin crises of the liberal world

A one-day conference on imperialism and the financial crisis hosted by the International Socialism Journal.

Speakers include Alex Callinicos, Jane Hardy, Pinar Garganas, Boris Yagaritsky and Marnie Holborow.

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